

Congress of the United States

Washington, DC 20515

January 19, 2024

The Honorable Xavier Becerra
Secretary
U.S. Department of Health and Human Services
200 Independence Avenue, S.W.
Washington, DC 20201

Dear Secretary Becerra,

We write to you today regarding the draft Notice of Proposed Rulemaking (NPRM), entitled “Supporting the Head Start Workforce and Consistent Quality Programming,” published by the Office of Head Start on November 20, 2023. This proposal includes the most significant changes to Head Start programming, policies, and requirements in nearly a decade. We applaud the Office’s efforts to address the crippling workforce challenges facing Head Start programs, as well as efforts to expand mental health services for families and employees. This proposed rule takes important steps in addressing each of these pressing issues. We also strongly encourage the Office to ensure that requirements under the final rule can be implemented by Head Start programs without resulting in slot reductions or program closures.

Head Start and Early Head Start programs provide critical, high-quality education, health, and social services to young children and families from low-income households. Unfortunately, many of these programs have remained significantly under resourced – particularly as it relates to staff and educators. Last year, the National Head Start Association found that nearly twenty percent of all Head Start and Early Head Start staff positions were vacant. The top reason cited for these vacancies continues to be low compensation. This is a particularly pressing issue for regions throughout the country where the cost of living dramatically outweighs income levels for child care workers and early childhood educators.

To address the ongoing workforce crisis, this proposed rule would implement pay parity, increase staff salaries, and expand employee benefits including health care and paid leave. Increasing pay for child care workers and early childhood educators is not only imperative to the future success of our nation’s children, but it also fulfills a long overdue debt. It is long past time that we take steps to increase compensation for Head Start workers. If appropriately implemented, these new policies would improve hiring and retention for Head Start educators and employees and build on the proven success of these programs.

While we are strongly supportive of the proposed rule’s intent to swiftly address workforce challenges, we acknowledge that these new requirements would lead to significantly increased costs for many Head Start programs. As you know, most Head Start programs already experience severe financial strain, and – without the necessary funding – programs could be forced to close

classrooms to meet new requirements under the rule. We urge the Office of Head Start to thoughtfully implement policies under the final rule to ensure that increased workforce costs would not result in slot reductions or program closures. As Members of Congress who have long advocated for increased annual funding for Head Start, we will continue to push for the funding needed to increase pay for Head Start workers while ensuring protection of current enrollment levels.

Educators in the United States are on the front lines of the child and adolescent mental health crisis, and we must ensure that our communities are equipped with the resources needed to address this public health emergency. This is particularly crucial for programs like Head Start that are dedicated to serving our nation's most under resourced communities. Research has shown that Head Start programs improve not only educational outcomes, but also social and behavioral development for children and families. This proposed rule takes important steps to build on this success by expanding mental health services for Head Start students, parents, and staff. Importantly, this rule takes into consideration the direct correlation between the mental health outcomes of children and the parents, family members, and other adults who care for them.

We strongly support your Office's efforts to increase, improve, and integrate mental health services for Head Start families under this proposed rule. We urge the Office to ensure that Head Start programs are equipped with the resources necessary to implement these new requirements without negatively impacting programs. As Members of Congress, we will continue to advocate for increased funding to support the critical role that Head Start and Early Head Start programs play in improving behavioral health outcomes throughout our communities.

Thank you for your continued commitment to Head Start and Early Head Start programs, workers, and families. We look forward to continuing to work with you on these important issues.

Sincerely,



Adam B. Schiff
Member of Congress



Zoe Lofgren
Member of Congress



Rashida Tlaib
Member of Congress



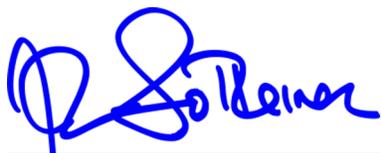
John Garamendi
Member of Congress



David J. Trone
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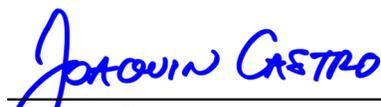
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